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ABSTRACT

A discussion of the literacy education needs of the Hispanic community in the United States provides a profile of the Hispanic population and offers a plan of action for educational programming. At 7 million, the illiterate Hispanic population comprises one-third of functionally illiterate Americans. This subgroup is diverse, with as much as half of the Hispanic workforce being workplace illiterate. Immigrant influx and dropout rates increase this number steadily. This level of illiteracy is costly in both social and economic terms, and an effective literacy program could save nearly $4 billion annually. The current literacy education system is disorganized, and Hispanics may be underrepresented. An additional 10% of functionally illiterate Hispanics, unemployed and discouraged, should be targeted for literacy programs in the next 5 years. Effective literacy courses must be structured to assign lessons matching student competency and experience. Training must be a public-private, employer-employee partnership, preferably delivered at the workplace. The proposed Hispanic Literacy Program initiative focuses on literacy for work, emphasizes the use of instructional technology, and provides for phased implementation. The program includes a high-visibility campaign, national training conference, revolving loan fund, analysis and dissemination of literacy training information, and a legislative initiative involving community-based organizations and national groups. (MSE) (Adjunct ERIC Clearinghouse on Literacy Education)

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LITERACY IN THE HISPANIC COMMUNITY

(A White Paper)

Dr. Fred Romero

The Problem

By one standard - years of school completed - the American workforce is becoming ever-better educated. In 1984, the average U.S. worker had not only graduated from high school, but had completed almost a year of college as well. But these averages disguise the more than 21 million American adults over 20 years of age who have been left behind: those who cannot read, write, and reason well enough to find or hold a productive job. Included among this population of functionally illiterate Americans are 7.0 million Hispanics 16 years and over.

The problems these functionally illiterate Americans face will grow worse in the years ahead, as the nation shifts more and more to a knowledge-based, skill-intensive economy. Already, auto workers must understand statistical quality control to manage a modern assembly line; department store salespeople must constantly learn about new and more complex products; secretaries must know not only typing and wordprocessing but graphics, database management and other advanced software. The jobs of the future will demand even higher levels of literacy for work.

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Illiterate Hispanics

Those Hispanics lacking the basic skills necessary for work are a diverse group. A small number are completely illiterate - unable to read street signs or write their names. Some, typically new immigrants cannot understand spoken English or do simple computations. A much larger group can read at an elementary level but lack the reading comprehension and problem solving skills needed to learn new tasks. Depending on the definition of workplace literacy, the number at risk range from a few thousand to half or more of the Hispanic workforce.

The Hispanic population 16 years and over was slightly over 12 million (12,184,000) in April 1986. Of that number, 64 percent were in the labor force (7,796,000) and nearly 12 percent of those in the labor force were unemployed (912,132). An estimated 56 percent of the 12 million work age population may be considered illiterate; this includes 58 percent of the unemployed (529,000) and 70 percent of those not in the labor force (3,072,000) who are school dropouts.

In absolute terms an estimated 7.0 million Hispanics 16 years and over are functionally illiterate, and of that total nearly half are unemployed or not in the labor force. Of immediate concern are the 650,000 functionally illiterate

Hispanics who are either unemployed or not in the labor force but who would prefer to be working but are not because they are unable to find a job and have given up looking for one. This number represents the universe of the most severely disadvantaged Hispanics in terms of being unable to access even the most menial entry level jobs in the labor market. They need both literacy skills and job-specific skills.

Because of both the number of (legal and illegal) immigrants and the high dropout rate (over 40 percent), more than 200,000 Hispanics are added annually to this pool of functional illiterates. The Hispanic dropout rate is considerably greater than that of either white or black youth. It is not enough, then, to direct attention to the immediate problem, preventive measures are called for as well.

A profile of the illiterate Hispanic population which should be targeted for immediate policy attention shows:

	Unemployed	On Welfare	Living In Public Housing
Youth (16-21)	210,000	67,000	22,000
Adults (21 and over)	440,000	52,000	18,000

The Cost of Illiteracy

The failure of so may Hispanic Americans to read and compute competently contributes significantly to many of the nation's economic and social problems. Such national concerns as rising crime rates, growing welfare rolls, reduced military readiness, and slow growth in productivity are tied together with a common thread: illiteracy. For example:

- Eighty-five percent of all juveniles who come before the courts are functionally illiterate, as are 60 percent of those in prison;

- Over one third of Hispanic mothers who receive support from welfare are functionally illiterate;

- An estimated 40 percent of current Hispanic military recruits cannot read the manuals required to perform equipment maintenance;

- More than three hundred of the nation's largest companies must conduct remedial instruction in math and English for new workers. A substantial amount of this instruction is directed toward Hispanics who are functionally illiterate.

People who cannot read or compute adequately not only contribute less than they could to the economy, they also often impose large costs on society. A conservative estimate of these cost might conclude that an effective literacy program for Hispanics could save the nation nearly $4.0 billion per year:

- If half of the 7 million functionally illiterate Hispanics (those Hispanics in the labor force) earned an extra 50 cents per hour because of literacy training, GNP would increase by $3.5 billion.

- If the 120,000 Hispanics functionally illiterate Hispanics who are on welfare could escape the rolls with literacy training, welfare costs could drop more than $300 million.

Current Efforts

Compared to the nation's structured system for providing elementary and secondary education, the adult literacy system is disorganized. There are programs at every level of government, as well as extensive efforts by private employers and volunteer groups. Altogether, some five million students will enroll in some literacy, English as a

Second Language or basic skills course this year. Typically, 40 percent drop out of adult literacy programs each year, although many return later. Although national figures on Hispanic participation are not available for each of the seventy-nine adult literacy programs funded by 14 different federal agencies at a cost of more than $350 million, enough data are available to indicate a probable underrepresentation of Hispanic adults in these programs. An estimated 70,000 Hispanics were enrolled in federally funded literacy courses nationally. Few data are available on completions. Moreover, few Hispanic organizations are involved in administering federally funded programs. SER-Jobs for Progress, LULAC and the Puerto Rican Forum are among the few organizations providing the much needed literacy training to Hispanics.

Policy Response

An additional 10 percent (60,000) of the universe of functionally illiterate Hispanics unemployed and discouraged workers should be targeted for literacy programs during the next five years. This initiative should be coupled with a national Hispanic community volunteer effort to increase school attendance among Hispanic youth.

Program - To be successful, literacy courses must be structured so that Hispanic students can be assigned to lessons that match their competency and experience. The ideal course for Hispanics is custom-tailored to the individual, with counseling immediately available. More cost effective approaches utilize computers and individually based, self-paced instruction systems to respond to this problem. For example, the Comprehensive Competencies Program developed by the Remediation and Training Institute with the support of the Ford Foundation uses computer-aided, individualized instruction to provide exactly the type and amount of instruction needed by each student. The system has proven to be highly successful in raising student achievement and test scores. SER-Jobs for Progress, Inc. has established eight Family Learning Centers modeled after the Comprehensive Competencies Program. These centers have produced an average of two years of educational attainment for each one hundred hours of instruction.

Three major themes run through the evidence gathered by SER-Jobs for Progress, Inc. concerning what works for adult literacy:

1. Teach literacy at the same time that job skills are taught, as close to the workplace as possible, in programs tailored to individual needs. By making job skills the content of literacy courses,

students focus on relevant material and are not forced to "waste time" learning basic skills before learning job skills.

2. Use technology such as computers and videodiscs to support teachers. Technology can deliver high quality material to a wide variety of settings and students. It can be tailored to individual needs and controlled by the students. It is patient and private. And it is cheap.

3. Apply a business-like, goal-oriented approach. By utilizing carefully structured, efficiently-delivered and monitored instruction, successful literacy programs can dramatically lower the cost per year of learning gain.

Partnership-Literacy training must be a public-private, employer-employee partnership. The partnership will be meaningful if, to the extent possible, instruction is delivered at the workplace, gaining many of the well-documented benefits of on-the-job-training. This partnership assumes a shared cost burden between employer, employee and the public sector. In short, an OJT arrangement is the preferred job strategy. Programmatically, this strategy combines both specific job skills training with literacy training. Financially, the costs are shared

by the partnership: firms are asked to provide jobs, provide release time for part of the instructional hours (literacy training), and underwrite a portion of the administrative costs. The public sector assumes the cost of outreach, literacy training, and part of the specific job skills training. With regard to preventive measures, the Hispanic community will work with states and cities to keep Hispanic youth in school. Volunteer assistance will be provided public school systems to help make instruction more attractive to Hispanics. SER's Family Learning Centers will be available to public schools on a fee-for-service basis to help with the more difficult cases.

HISPANIC LITERACY PROGRAM

(An Action Plan)

The Hispanic Literacy Program will be a part of a rapidly growing national effort to address the problem of youth and adult illiteracy. The Administration has been involved as a result of Mrs. Barbara Bush's active concern; also Secretary Bell's Adult Literacy initiative in 1983 directly involved the President. Many states are also making literacy an important issue. Business has also become concerned, with Harold McGraw's Business Council for Effective Literacy (BCEL) the most visible recent initiative. IBM and other computer companies that are prospective vendors of equipment and software are about to release new products aimed at the literacy market. A growing number of firms are becoming worried about their ability to hire competent workers.

The Hispanic Literacy Program initiative will:

1. Focus on Literacy for Work - As is appropriate to the population group which is the object of attention with this program. The instruction will be delivered by Family Learning Centers established in 110 communities located primarily in California, Texas, Colorado, New Mexico, New York, Florida and Illinois, where the vast majority of Hispanics live.

2. Emphasize Technology - Including computer-based courses, videodisc instruction and automated management - so that the training can be replicated and distributed cheaply to a wide range of clients throughout the SER-Jobs for Progress delivery system of 40 affiliates operating in the 110 communities.

3. Phased Implementation - to obtain an orderly and efficient program over a five year schedule which will serve a total of 60,000 Hispanic youth and adults.

The action plan outlined below is divided into five parts: (1) a high-profile campaign by selected Hispanic leaders in conjunction with Administration officials including Secretaries Brock and Bennett; (2) a national training conference bringing together SER staff, Private Industry Council members and school officials from the communities selected for the literacy initiative in the first year of the five-year schedule; (3) establishment of a SER revolving fund from Hispanic community and private sector contributions to supplement federal government funds to be used to underwrite Family Learning Center operations; (4) a research/information clearinghouse within SER to disseminate best practices to the new Family Learning Centers as they are phased into the program in the succeeding four years of the five-year plan; and (5) a legislative initiative combining the learning of the Hispanic Literacy Program with other program initiatives in order to improve the quality of public school literacy instruction.

I. HIGH VISIBILITY CAMPAIGN BY HISPANIC COMMUNITY LEADERS

The first step is a two-proned effort to raise the visibility of the Hispanic literacy issue. One

part of the effort concentrates on joining the Department of Labor and other Federal departments in their own literacy initiatives. This would include participating in the PLUS/AD Council/ABC publicity campaign this fall to bolster current efforts to put literacy on the national agenda on a par with national competitiveness, welfare reform, and displaced workers. The second part concerns raising the literacy issue within the Hispanic community. The campaign would include:

1) A series of speeches, testimony and appearance by Hispanic leaders, joining cabinet and other Administration officials as appropriate;

2) A "White Paper" on the Hispanic Literacy Program to be used as the basis for policy negotiations and information; and

3) A concerted effort to raise Hispanic literacy higher on the agenda of members of Congress, corporate philanthropies and private foundations.

II. A NATIONAL TRAINING CONFERENCE

The training will be structured primarily on knowledge gained from the successful operation of the Family Centers in existence in Colorado, Washington, D.C. and Wisconsin in addition to information bearing on the emphasis being placed on literacy in the workplace. The training will focus on: the software already

developed; the successful techniques already tested; the range of industries to which literacy training will be directed, the delivery system to be employed; and the specific Hispanic populations to be served. In addition, SER will provide orientation on the experiment with the use of individual literacy training vouchers.

A. Industries

1) Hotels, because they hire so many entry-level Hispanics;

2) Agriculture, so that Hispanic migrant farm labor can develop and consider alternatives to agricultural employment;

3) Day care centers, because they could employ many Hispanic welfare mothers;

4) Fast food restaurants, because they are widespread and hire may young Hispanics;

5) Financial service firms, because

they are concerned with its ability to hire entry level workers and Hispanics need to establish a firmer foothold in this industry; and

6) The Military, because it has such a large stake in workplace literacy.

B. Hispanic Groups To Be Served

1) Welfare recipients, with priority to those living in public housing;

2) Unemployed Hispanic adults;

3) Migrant farmworkers;

4) Youth; and

5) Soon-to-be-released prisoners.

C. Delivery System

SER-Jobs for Progress is the primary delivery system and will be responsible initially to get the Hispanic Literacy

Program "off the ground" within its own network. It will then plan to extend the delivery system to include LULAC and GI Forum chapters across the country. SER will ensure that a close linkage is established and maintained with Private Industry Councils, public schools systems, employers and unions.

D. Literacy Training Vouchers

A voucher system for literacy training will be tested in selected sites, the objective of which will be to maximize assumption of individual responsibility for determining the timing, specific instructional arrangements and final costs for services provided.

III. REVOLVING LOAN FUND

Initial start-up costs and operational costs for one year total $50,000 for each Family Learning Center. Each center serves 100 clients for 100 hours of instruction, roughly 300-400 clients per year. The average cost is $500 per client. The

average educational gain is two years for every one hundred hours of instruction.

SER-Jobs for Progress will establish a revolving loan fund to supplement federal private sector contributions to the Hispanic Literacy Program initiative. The combined effort will result in funding 40 Family Learning Centers, collectively providing literacy training to 8,000 Hispanics in the first year of the five-year schedule.

SER affiliates will match the federal grant for their center. Private sector donations and loans will provide the initial funds for the revolving loan fund. Affiliates will have the opportunity to borrow from the fund to meet "match requirements." A minimum federal contribution of $3.5 million will be required the first year.

IV. ANALYSIS AND DISSEMINATION OF INFORMATION

While SER has been successful with its own literacy training efforts, more can be learned for the system as a whole. The provision of basic skills/literacy training is extraordinarily varied. Moreover, SER is placing more emphasis on literacy training linked to the workplace and thus

needs to know "what works" for whom, and in what industries. What is needed is a way for SER to evaluate its own courseware on a systematic and consistent basis, to communicate to its network the best practices, to improve on and distribute its software and system, and to encourage coordination. It will immediately establish contact with DOE's Adult Literacy Initiative and the American Society for Training and Development (ASTD). ASTD has excellent contacts with employers and is developing a program to survey employers and determine best practices.

V. A LEGISLATIVE INITIATIVE

On the basis of the analytical work and its ongoing program experience, SER will put together a legislative literacy initiative including: financing of a major literacy effort on behalf of Hispanics, amendments to JTPA to redirect existing JTPA funds, targeting welfare funds for literacy, and new efforts in the Department of Defense and elsewhere in the federal government. It will invite other community-based organizations and national groups concerned with the literacy problem to assist in promoting the legislative package with Congressional members and the Administration.